

Legal Avenues: Your Road to Solutions

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Innovative Mentorship Series (Part 1): Firm Revitalization through Reverse Mentoring

While there is no denying the value of traditional legal mentorship programs and strategies, the rapidly evolving nature of law practice and law firm demographics sometimes demands an alternative approach to networking and knowledge sharing within firms.¹ The first in a two-part series on creative mentorship solutions, this article will explore one alternative that has gained traction in recent years among firms seeking to bridge the gap between veteran attorneys and new associates: reverse mentoring.

Mutual Benefits

Originally pioneered by GE in the late 1990s as a way to increase collaboration and technological awareness between the company's senior management staff and young support staff, reverse mentorship radically altered the traditional mentor/mentee relationship by requiring senior staff members to become the students of their younger peers.² This role reversal not only helped make members of senior management more tech savvy, but it also gave the young support staff a renewed sense of purpose and belonging, as well as a rare opportunity to demonstrate their expertise to upper management, resulting in increased company loyalty and reduced turnover.³

Seeking to capitalize on similar workforce benefits, reverse mentoring partnerships have since been embraced by a number of law firms—not only for the purpose of getting seasoned attorneys up to speed on their social media and computer skills, but also as a way to generate feedback on firm culture, encourage idea exchange, increase morale among newer associates, and foster an environment of collaboration. By foregoing the traditional “top-down” approach to mentorship, a multigenerational legal team can gain a mutual respect and appreciation for each member's skills and contributions. Likewise, the sponsoring firm can benefit from a more engaged, connected, and informed legal team.⁴

Implementation Strategies

It may seem unlikely that such an anti-hierarchical concept could ever be implemented at a traditional law firm, but establishing a successful reverse mentoring strategy is possible with some advance planning and careful analysis of firm culture and dynamics. Addressing the concerns and suggestions of potential participants during the planning stage is key to successful implementation. Customized, structured programs that are properly incentivized tend to survive longer and have a broader impact than spontaneous partnerships that occur organically out of necessity.⁵

Setting clear guidelines and objectives for reverse mentoring partnerships is essential to ensuring that each party understands what they are striving to accomplish. Creating a timeline and minimum meeting requirements—for instance, mandating one-hour meetings every other week for at least four months—can also prove to be helpful guides for busy participants who may forget to dedicate time to the mentoring partnership otherwise.⁶

Overcoming Cultural Barriers

The reality of reverse mentoring is that some senior attorneys and new associates will inevitably balk at the idea of switching traditional mentorship roles—whether due to pride, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, fear of change, or inflexible billable hour requirements.⁷ A 2011 survey on law firm professional development by the WestLegalEdCenter and the NALP Foundation demonstrates that acceptance of non-traditional mentorship strategies isn't universal.⁸

However, implementing reverse mentoring as a mandatory program, revising billable hour policies to accommodate mentorship, and carefully pairing mentors/mentees to ensure best outcomes are all viable strategies for alleviating some of the most common objections to reverse mentoring.⁹

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Footnotes

¹Woolf, Linda S., Bob Fulton, and Sandra Corbett. “What Young Lawyers Want” *The Federation of Defense and Corporate Counsel 2013 Winter Meeting*. 6 Mar. 2013. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014. Available at: <http://www.thefederation.org/documents/12.What%20Young%20Lawyers%20Want.pdf>

²Kwoh, Leslie. “Reverse Mentoring Cracks the Workplace” *The Wall Street Journal*. 28 Nov. 2011. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014. Available at: <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203764804577060051461094004?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2F%2FSB10001424052970203764804577060051461094004.html>

³McKenna, Brendan. “Will Reverse Mentoring Work at Law Firms?” *Law Technology News*. 3 Dec. 2014. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014. Available at: <http://snaggers.com/2011/12/03/will-reverse-mentoring-work-at-law-firms/>

⁴DiBianca, Molly. “Engaging Lawyers with Reverse Mentoring.” *Law Practice Today*. Oct. 2011. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014. Available at: http://www.americanbar.org/publications/law_practice_today_home/law_practice_today_archive/october11/engaging_lawyers_with_reverse_mentoring.html

⁵McKenna.

⁶DiBianca.

⁷McKenna.

⁸Chow, Andrew. “Law Firm Professional Development Continues to Fall Short” *Findlaw Strategist*. 26 Jan. 2012. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014. Available at: <http://blogs.findlaw.com/strategist/2012/01/law-firm-professional-development-continues-to-fall-short.html>

⁹McKenna.